

**OPERATING BUDGET JOINT COMMITTEE HEARINGS
VETERANS & SENIORS AND
CONSUMER PROTECTION & GOVERNMENT OPERATIONS**

Minutes

The Operating Budget Joint Committee Hearings of Veterans & Seniors and Consumer Protection & Government Operations was held in the Rose Y. Caracappa Legislative Auditorium of the William H. Rogers Legislative Building, Smithtown, New York on Friday, **October 24, 2003**.

MEMBERS PRESENT:

Legislator Cameron Alden, Chairman

Legislator Peter O'Leary

Legislator Lynne Nowick

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE:

Joe Muncey, Budget Review Office

Terry Pearsall, Aide to Legislator Lindsay

Art Lozeau, Director of Suffolk County Veterans Service Agency

Andrew Tarantino

MINUTES TAKEN BY:

Diana Kraus - Court Stenographer

(THE HEARING WAS CALLED TO ORDER AT 2:00 PM)

CHAIRMAN ALDEN:

Good afternoon and welcome to the -- we're going to do Vets & Seniors, the public hearing first; then we're going to go into the Consumer Protection & Government Affairs. We're going to have the pledge. And we'll have Legislator O'Leary lead us in that.

(SALUTATION)

CHAIRMAN ALDEN:

Art Lozeau. We have one card. You have your choice. You can stand at the podium there or you can sit down right here at the desk. While Art's preparing to speak, anybody else that has any comments or any requests or any proposed changes? If you could just get them in order and we'll go right into anything else right after Art's done speaking.

MR. LOZEAU:

I'm Art Lozeau, the Director of the Veterans Service Agency. I'm here today to comment on the recommendation in the 2004 Recommended Budget about abolishing one of the Veterans Service Officer's positions. While I disagree with the recommendations, I'll give you a quick rationale. That position was vacated on September 1st, 2002 when the Tier 1 employee took advantage of the early retirement incentive program. And the position remains vacant today due to a combination of the hiring freeze imposed in 2002 coupled with the early retirement plan itself. And it was left vacant in order to achieve the desired savings.

Leaving a vacant position like that is an exception because in previous years, all of them, they've been filled as soon as possible. But as I mentioned, the freeze and the incentives -- savings incentives by early retirement precluded that. I want to emphasize that we want to fill that position as soon as we can in 2004 as the savings allow.

What I handed out to you is a printout from the Department of Veterans Affairs, the VA. You'll note on there, it states that Suffolk County has 110,845 veterans. That's on that white sheet on the left-hand side. Actually it's the greatest number of veterans of any county in New York State. What that chart shows you is what those veterans represent in the form of money that comes into the County. In gross figures it's over 308 million.

Over on the far right, Medical Services and Administrative is Northport, which is about 207 million. The Construction and Related Costs is a small amount. I'm not sure what that is to be frank with you. Insurance and Indemnities, those are the ones that -- insurance policies primarily of the World War and Korean veterans will get dividends and as well as when the policy is cashed based on the death of the veteran. Readjustment and Vocational Rehabilitation, the money the VA spends -- voc/rehab is when there's a service member injured, he can be rehabilitated to include education. And those are the funds -- the VA pays

for that.

Compensation and Pension is the one I'm zeroing in on. Those 110,000 veterans or their survivors represent the money spent by the VA in Suffolk County, 84 million dollars. And I point it out because that represents a large amount of money coming into Suffolk County, which in a large part is due to Veteran Service Officers. Now, I won't tell you that the Veteran Service Agency is responsible for 84 million dollars. Because of various -- but there is a check, for instance, a disability check of a World War II veteran is in this amount.

But I bring these figures up to emphasize that the position of the Veterans Service Officer is directly related in servicing veterans and achieving the monies that come into Suffolk County. Again, the Veterans Service Agency, as far as I know, is one of the few that does have an effect of bringing in money as opposed to spending it, etcetera.

Now, I want to explain that we have a total of five Veteran Service Officers; four are in the office here in Hauppauge. We have one in our office in Riverhead because we've maintained two offices. It happens that New York State Division of Veterans Affairs does provide us three days, a Service Officer, to work, collocate with the Riverhead office. That New York State Division of Veterans Affairs Officer's primary job is at the Stony Brook, Long Island, State Veterans Home, which is run by New York State. New York State Division of Veterans Affairs also has Service Officers that are scattered throughout various Counties to assist the Counties in reaching different areas and so forth as is done here.

As an aside, there's also a New York State Officer in the St. Albans Veterans Nursing Home, which is similar to the one at Stony Brook.

CHAIRMAN ALDEN:

Art, can I just --

MR. LOZEAU:

Yes.

CHAIRMAN ALDEN:

Because actually there's a Committee going on right now that's working on the budget. So if we're going to make a proposed change to them, I want to try to get it into them as quickly as possible.

MR. LOZEAU:

Okay. Well --

CHAIRMAN ALDEN:

You feel that the services that are being provided to the veterans now, because of this one job that's been frozen, you think it's been a detriment?

MR. LOZEAU:

Well, it's been a lesser amount of people that can work claims. We are overloading the Service Officers we have by not having that position filled. And if you abolish it, over the years you're going to have less Service Officers to do the claims.

Now the fact that veterans decreased in population is not a good analogy to make because when they decrease in population, you've automatically increased the number of claims because there's a death claim and there's dependency indemnity compensation claims, etcetera. The way -- the amount of contacts, which roughly equal about 20,000 a year --

CHAIRMAN ALDEN:

The bottom line is we can't service the veterans' needs.

MR. LOZEAU:

It would be detrimental to the veterans and to Suffolk County to abolish that position.

CHAIRMAN ALDEN:

Okay. Budget Review, was that part of your recommendation when you went through the budget, to abolish that position?

MR. MUNCEY:

When we made that recommendation --

CHAIRMAN ALDEN:

Or did that come over -- was that proposed from the County Executive?

MR. MUNCEY:

Right now the County Executive's recommending all five positions not continue in 2004. He's not recommending that it's out. Well, it's part of the overall view, there's over a thousand vacant positions in the County. This is one of those positions that have been vacant for more than a year. So he recommended that it's not filled.

CHAIRMAN ALDEN:

Okay. Did you look at the fact that the reason why it's been vacant, it would have been filled, but it's been vacant because of the hiring freeze? Is that part of the thing that you looked at?

MR. MUNCEY:

Looked at a lot of stuff, right. But it is vacant at this time.

CHAIRMAN ALDEN:

How about the functioning of the office, did you consider how the office --

MR. MUNCEY:

I told Art I didn't -- I really didn't get any indication if there was a backlog of work at this time. He said that New York City's been very cooperative, you know, working together with the County to service the veterans and their needs.

MR. LOZEAU:

I don't ever recall a conversation about a backlog.

MR. MUNCEY:

No, no, I'm saying you don't have a backlog that I'm aware of.

MR. LOZEAU:

We have a workload that is being shared by a lesser number of Veterans Service Officers.

CHAIRMAN ALDEN:

Actually what I'm going to do is, I'll leave it up to the other Committee members if they want to join in this, I'm going to either propose a stand-alone or I'm going to propose a change to the Committee that's meeting right now that we leave that position in; whether we're able to fill it or not will become a question, you know, as far as how the budget goes. But, I think next year,

it's a new year, the hiring freeze will not be in effect. There will be some other kind of, you know, situation that we'll be facing.

So, I think what my recommendation is going to be either as a stand-alone or to that Committee that we reinstitute that position; whether we fund it not, would be a different question. And, you know, that will be up to the -- actually the Committee as a whole, the Legislature as a whole. But I want to be able to give the full Legislative body that option.

LEG. NOWICK:

And, Cameron, I do agree you want to do that right away.

CHAIRMAN ALDEN:

Yes.

MR. LOZEAU:

Well, I agree with that. I would like to keep the slot.

CHAIRMAN ALDEN:

Yes, that's what I'm going to do. We're pretty much done. Art's the only speaker that's requested to speak. So as soon as we're done with this, I'm going to walk back there. Good. Thanks Art.

MR. LOZEAU:

Thank you.

CHAIRMAN ALDEN:

Anybody else want to address any veterans and senior concerns?

MR. TARANTINO:

Good afternoon. My name is Andrew Tarantino. I'm from the Sixth District, which is currently unrepresented. And for the purposes of the record, I am a candidate for that seat.

I realize that transportation is covered under another Committee, but as I stand here before the Senior Committee, there's a section of the budget that I would also like you to take careful consideration of. As I walked the District in the Sixth District, there are plenty of retirement communities and -- you know, the planned retirement communities. In over 25 communities I am learning and have had expressed to me that they have a lack of transportation. I'm finding 70 and 80-year-old women that have to walk down 347 or other major thoroughfares just to go get

a container of milk. They do have access to transportation they can order a week ahead of time, but, you know, ordering a bus a week before you need to run to the store to get a dozen eggs to bake something seems a little irresponsible.

I realize that part of it has to do with the town building projects, putting these developments all over the area. But as a County provider of transportation, as we take a look at the transportation budget and your impact on the seniors, I think that we should work together and focus on extending the bus routes in taking a look at the recommendations of the Transportation Department. Thank you.

CHAIRMAN ALDEN:

Now, did you bring this up to Public Works because that's basically --

MR. TARANTINO:

No, I have not yet.

CHAIRMAN ALDEN:

That's the primary Committee for transportation.

MR. TARANTINO:

Right.

CHAIRMAN ALDEN:

All right. Thank you.

MR. TARANTINO:

Thank you.

CHAIRMAN ALDEN:

Anybody else that would like to address this Committee?

Seeing none, I'm going to close the hearing. All in favor of that? We have unanimous support from the Committee. We're closing that hearing. Thank you.

Now, we're just going to go right into Consumer Protection and Government Operations. Is there anyone that wants to address the Committee in the Budget Hearing on Consumer Protection or Government Operations?

We have no one from the public. Legislator Nowick.

LEG. NOWICK:

I just want to put on the record I was in touch with the Commissioner of Consumer Affairs; and he just asked me to put on the record that according to the Budget Review Report, they said there is no backlog. In fact, the Commissioner says there are 100 cases of backlog per investigator. They need to have more clerical and more investigators. What they would like to request, just for the record and I'm just putting this on the record for them, is one Home Improvement Investigator, one Complaint Investigator and two clerical workers. They tell me they make in their Department over a million dollars which --

CHAIRMAN ALDEN:

I'm a little slow in writing. One Home Improvement Investigator?

LEG. NOWICK:

Yes. I can give you these.

CHAIRMAN ALDEN:

Just give --

LEG. NOWICK:

One Home Improvement Investigator, one Complaint Investigator and two clerical workers. And their backlog right now is 100 cases of backlog per investigator. I understand they make -- this is what he told me -- they make over one million dollars in that Department. They will cover their services. But they believe they can do more while clearing up the backlog.

CHAIRMAN ALDEN:

So all four of those positions relate to home improvement and home improvement contractors and regulatory and compliance --

LEG. NOWICK:

One is a Home Improvement Investigator. The other is the Complaint Investigator. And I guess they all go hand in hand.

CHAIRMAN ALDEN:

Okay. Budget Review, your recommendation is for what?

MR. MUNCEY:

When we spoke to Consumer Affairs, they had indicated that -- you know, we had asked them more than once if there was any kind of backlog at that time. They didn't indicate anything, that there was. If there is, then there is. But I wasn't aware of it at the time. Based on not having any backlogs, and these positions well being vacant for a considerable amount of time, the recommendation was to, since they were vacant, to abolish them in 2004.

CHAIRMAN ALDEN:

So these are actually positions that are on the record, but they're looking --

MR. MUNCEY:

They're vacant.

CHAIRMAN ALDEN:

So all four of these are current positions, but they're vacant?

MR. MUNCEY?

Well, the Consumer Affairs Investigator One, that's vacant; the Complaint Investigator, that would be a new position that would have to be created.

CHAIRMAN ALDEN:

Okay. So a Complaint Investigator is new.

MR. MUNCEY:

Right.

CHAIRMAN ALDEN:

The Home Improvement --

MR. MUNCEY:

-- Investigator does exist at this time.

CHAIRMAN ALDEN:

Okay. And that's just vacant.

MR. MUNCEY:

Right. And then there's --

CHAIRMAN ALDEN:

Clerical.

MR. MUNCEY:

Three clerical that are vacant right now. So if they're asking just to fill two, that means one could be abolished. Now, out of the three clerical, there two clerk typists and one account clerk, which is vacant at this time.

CHAIRMAN ALDEN:

So, there's two clerical and one account clerk that's vacant?

MR. MUNCEY:

Right. That's correct.

CHAIRMAN ALDEN:

And they're just asking for the two clericals; so it sounds like they agree that the account clerk could actually be abolished.

MR. MUNCEY:

You'd have to ask them on that one.

CHAIRMAN ALDEN:

I'm just taking it from an implication that's what was asked for and your recommendation. So putting the two of them together, that's what we have to work with. All right.

MR. MUNCEY:

Thank you.

CHAIRMAN ALDEN:

Thank you. Any other comments or questions? Anybody else want to address this Committee on that hearing? Okay. Seeing no one, I'm going to make a motion to close the hearing.

LEG. O'LEARY:

Second.

CHAIRMAN ALDEN:

All in favor? We stand adjourned, then. Thank you.

(THE HEARING WAS ADJOURNED AT 2:15 P.M.)